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Journalist is 'obsessed' with subjects she profiles

Preparing for New Yorker stories takes 2 months, writer tells NU

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Larissa MacFarquhar goes on dates with interesting people for a living.

MacFarquhar, a staff writer for The New Yorker, has profiled subjects ranging from college professors to major film directors. She interviews her subjects over dinner, and her male subjects sometimes offer to pick up the tab. They forget that someone actually is paying her to have dinner with them.

MacFarquhar spoke to a crowd of about 50 people Monday afternoon in Fisk Hall. Her lecture, titled "The New Yorker Profile: People and Place," was sponsored by Northwestern's Center for the Writing Arts.

MacFarquhar began her career as an unpaid writer for The Paris Review and contributed to other European magazines as a freelance writer. She described her experience working for these magazines as demeaning and embarrassing.

MacFarquhar said she hated the shallow questions her editors wanted her to ask these midlevel stars, questions such as, "How did you lose your virginity?"

"Nothing is more humiliating," she said. "All of these things I've escaped, thank God. I've been saved by coming to The New Yorker."

MacFarquhar began working for The New Yorker at age 24, when she was published in The Talk of The Town section. She said that she enjoys the level of professionalism at the magazine and that there is no illusion of "being buddies."

MacFarquhar said the profiling process takes about two months. She spends three weeks reading or studying the works of the person she is profiling, one week with the actual person, a week transcribing the tapes from her interviews and four to five days writing the actual profile.

During her month of preparation before meeting the people she profiles, MacFarquhar said she immerses herself completely in their work. She becomes "genuinely obsessed with them" and finds her subjects to be utterly fascinating during the week she spends with them. However, she maintains a level of professionalism throughout the entire process, she said.

"I'm not their friend," she said. "Right now I'm a journalist. I'm not there to enjoy spending time with them. I have something I want to get from them."

Although her passive position might be seen as vulnerable, MacFarquhar said that the passivity gives her strength.

"It's a source of power not to talk about yourself," MacFarquhar said. "I get addicted to that feeling of power."

That sensation is something similar to what a therapist must feel while listening to his or her client, she said.

Just as MacFarquhar becomes immersed in her subjects when they speak, the audience appeared immersed in her lecture. Medill sophomore Rachel Clayton said she found MacFarquhar's lecture inspirational.

"I want her life," Clayton said. "She was so articulate and poised, and not only intelligent but experienced. Her ability to do what she does are the skills I aspire to one day have."

Medill sophomore Stephen Schuler said he was similarly impressed with MacFarquhar's lecture.

"When I think of journalism, I think of the everyday paper or the nightly news," Schuler said. "I was surprised with how personal journalism can be and how much you can get out of someone else. She really showed the importance of interviews."

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